

The search for the perfect citrus variety extended all the way to South America. In the mid-1800s, a citrus tree in the state of Bahia, Brazil spawned a strange new mutant; a “navel” orange, so called because each fruit grew a base spot that closely resembled a human “belly-button.” Since it was essentially seedless, successive generations of Bahia navel oranges had to be grafted onto existing root stock instead of being propagated from seed. This orange’s impressive size, gorgeous, thick, golden skin and, most of all, its wonderful flavor made it worth the effort. Sometime between 1873 and 1875, William Saunders of the U.S. Department of Agriculture sent two small Bahia navel orange trees to his former east coast neighbors, Eliza and Luther Tibbets. Planted behind the Tibbets’ Riverside, California home, they thrived in Southern California’s hot, dry summers and mild, just-above-freezing, winters. Mrs. Eliza Tibbets is generally considered the founder of California’s citrus industry, having planted the first Washington (Bahia) navel orange trees in Riverside.